

STREET FIGHT / For some ARA members it's 'hip' to trash the house of a supremacist; others, however, feel 'betrayed' by this new militancy

Anti-racist group shows signs of rift over escalating violence

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IT'S the morning after a night of stone-throwing and street brawls and Sally, an organizer for Anti-Racist Action, is flying.

Sitting at a Bloor Street restaurant patio, she has Saturday's newspapers stacked before her. She reads out loud from The Toronto Sun: "Organizers for Anti-Racist Action pulled a fast one on Metro police and racist security forces..."

She gives a high five to Ian, another ARA member. She laughs uproariously at a photo of Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel's house, covered from top to bottom in plastic. "What a loser," she says.

Sally and Ian are convinced that, by trashing the home of white-supremacist hotline operator Gary Schipper on Friday night, ARA has moved a step closer to shutting down Toronto's best-organized racist groups.

But Friday night's vigilante-style attack has come under fire from some ARA members and

others who fear that such tactics will provoke further violence in a conflict that has begun to degenerate into a gang-style war between anti-racist teen-agers and white-power skinheads.

In some quarters, the mood is one of despair and defeat rather than celebration. Some ARA sympathizers say that what was the fastest-growing youth group in Toronto, regularly drawing up to 500 people to anti-racism gatherings, might have made a tactical error.

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ARA projects militant, 'hip' image

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"We're making them [supremacists] more militant — we trashed their house," says ARA member Zev Tiefmach, 15. "Who's to say that a group of Nazis won't come to my house and set it on fire?"

Linda Lamberg-Pelly, a teacher at Oakwood Collegiate Institute and a long-time anti-racism activist, says she felt "betrayed, my heart just sank. I felt that I was witnessing the demise of a movement which could have captured the hearts and minds of youth in a very positive way."

Last year Ms. Lamberg-Pelly invited ARA representatives to speak at her school. But after attending Friday's rally and watching a peaceful demonstration turn to stone-throwing, she wonders whether that will ever happen again.

Formed less than a year ago, ARA has attracted seasoned activists from feminist, labour and anarchist groups, as well as a growing number of high-school- and university-age young people who have not previously been politically active.

The group formed last fall to demonstrate outside a courthouse where members of the Heritage Front were facing charges that their hotline incited hatred against racial minorities.

During the past year, ARA has sought to counter aggressive high-school recruitment drives by supremacist groups such as the Heritage Front, the Church of the Creator and the Ku Klux Klan. Relations are so tense that ARA organizers such as Sally and Ian use pseudonyms.

ARA's tactics are direct, its image militant — and, as Sally says, "hip." Organizers say they are fighting white supremacists on the streets in the only language the supremacists understand: that of physical intimidation and power. They fight racism by portraying its adherents as "losers," "Nazi-posers" and "bone-heads."

In January, when the Heritage Front put flyers in every locker at Riverdale High School, ARA mobilized 300 students to tell the Front it wasn't wanted. Last November 200 ARA members surrounded a bar and forced the cancellation of a white-supremacist rock concert; as skinheads left the bar with police escorts, demonstrators pelted them with eggs.

Members say they are attracted to

ARA because it provides instant gratification. "We get things accomplished," says 17-year-old Jono Nemethy. "You go down to a demonstration and the racist scumbags are just, like, totally intimidated by us and they run off. There's a lot of personal satisfaction in that. If they don't run off at least we really irritate them. We're a thorn in their side."

Zev says more conventional tactics, such as government lobbying and court battles, take too long for people his age. He pointed to the case of Mr. Zundel, who was acquitted in 1992 of disseminating hate literature.

"Zundel bounced around in the courts for nine years to find out he was innocent," Zev says. "Nine years — that's a long time. That's more than half my life."

ARA began fighting with words and numbers, but quickly progressed to eggs, then stones, then fists, bottles and pipes. When police found three guns in a recent raid on a home belonging to members of the Church of the Creator, many began to worry about the next stage of this conflict.

Last summer ARA won a territorial war over two downtown bars. White supremacists and ARA members show up at each other's events to disrupt and photograph participants. They follow each other home and around the city. They try to break each other's answering-machine codes and they get themselves on each other's phone lists to gain information about forthcoming events.

ARA organizes self-defence courses. Its members report repeated phone harassment. Some, like Jono, an ARA photographer whose hand bears a razor-blade scar, have been attacked on their way home from ARA events. "I'm always running around with a big telephoto lens so I'm a pretty visible part of ARA," he says.

According to Ian, some members of ARA also engage in street violence. "Any time you fight a Nazi it's in self-defence because they are about destruction and genocide," he says. "Our philosophy is zero tolerance for Nazis — whether it's 30 guys going into a bar looking to beat people up or one guy on the street wearing a Heritage Front hat."

Explaining Friday night's clash at a College Street bar after the Schipper house attack, Sally adds: "When

a guy comes at you with a baseball bat, you don't try to change his views."

Zev says he got caught up in the "mob mentality" of Friday's rally, but says it now frightens him. "My initial reaction was 'He's a Nazi, he's scum, let's kill him.' I was flying, I felt like I was on top of the world. It's cheaper than heroin."

Now he's contemplating dropping out of ARA. "We were thinking like the fascists do, being violent just because of who they are. I don't want to think like them."

For Zev, fighting back stops short of breaking windows in an unprovoked attack, something he didn't know was going to take place at the rally. He says he thought they were there only to expose the Heritage Front's centre of operation to the neighbours.

"It took a step in the direction ARA is going to be going and I don't know if I want to be going in that direction."

Sally disagrees. She says white supremacists prey on the vulnerable and feed off people's fear. Whenever they take a loss, she says, their ability to intimidate is diminished.

"ARA has been able to shatter their image of indestructibility and ferocity. We caught them off guard, we exposed their weakness."

The real escalation of violence, she says, is from increasingly bold white supremacists. She cited the beating of a Tamil man in a Toronto restaurant last week, and of a Jewish shop owner in Kitchener, Ont., two weeks ago.

But Ms. Lamberg-Pelly warns that violence could undermine the fight against racism. She cites an ARA chant that goes: "What do you do when the Nazis come? Act up! Act out!"

"That's exactly what they were doing," she says. "Some people are using an extremely important movement for their own needs to act out aggressively."

Ian rejects the criticisms, saying ARA takes anger that comes from white-supremacist campaigns and directs it to a constructive cause.

"We are providing a forum for people to vent their anger," he says.

"Some of these people would get into fights anyway. Better they get into a fight with a Nazi than with some frat boy in a bar."